

Oral Testing and its Classroom Application in a Japanese University

DOUGLAS, Lynne

This paper discusses the development of a continuous form of oral assessment over a series of English classes of first and second year English Major and non-major students at Momoyama Gakuin University, Osaka. The paper explains how a continuous method of oral assessment can be administered in the classroom, and also shows the implications of implementing this approach into English language program planning.

Oral assessment of English is carried out in a variety of ways by teachers of English at my university, as language students are required to complete their courses with a grade score. Developments in the communicative approach of language teaching now encourage a variety of ways to grade students' oral achievements.

However, the application of a classroom-generated oral assessment is often thought to be too difficult to administer. It may be judged as too time-consuming in medium to large-sized classes of twenty-five to fifty students. It may also be judged to be too difficult to devise a fair criteria, so that each student can be assessed in the same way.

While Japanese students usually agree that English is worth learning, their teachers are often confronted by cultural constraints that inhibit the student during oral activities. The cultural constraint of 'modesty', (Brown 2004: 15), explains the social behavior of many young Japanese speakers of English. The value of self-effacement, not usually part of the values of an English speaker, loads the performance of English by Japanese students with contradictory behavior.

I have observed that young Japanese students in classrooms, refrain from speaking when in the presence of senior or higher status speakers, and young females defer to male and higher status speakers. This causes a dilemma for

teachers who try to simulate real life language interactions.

Within English language classrooms, students can exhibit a 'fear of negative evaluation' which impedes learning in a number of ways, (Leary and Kowalski, 1995). Students tend to avoid doing things that will cause a negative evaluation, for example, 'cold responses', 'in front of class' presentations, and other oral activities.

When students are asked a question, and are required to provide a spontaneous answer, or when making presentations in front of other students, they may demonstrate an inhibited performance.

The exception to this 'language behavior', however are students who have studied or worked overseas, and also stayed with a home stay family, and usually show some awareness of appropriate responses, tone and fluency, especially during 'cold responses'. But for most students, the confidence and language required for oral production for classroom assessment must be learned during English language classroom activities.

During their high school English studies, students have been assessed by a method of only testing of listening, reading and some writing. Speaking practice may include listen and repeat drills or modeling by the teacher, but there are few opportunities for interactive oral activities in which students can practice oral English and be assessed, within the high school English system.

In order to bridge the gap between my students' previous language experience and a program which would involve them in a range of interactive language activities, I first analyzed the students' reactions to a range of exercises at various language levels. The effectiveness of the activity, I discovered, depended on the level of stimulation combined with the degree of acceptance by the student, based on the perceived language outcome.

Students' understanding of the interactive situation and purpose for the interaction helped them to improve their oral performance. Their understanding of the topic, the form of the conversation (with a sample dialogue), enabled them to achieve the objectives required for assessment. Preparing a series of stages of integrated activities, with easily understood content (listening, speaking, reading and writing), I believed, would ensure student understanding and involvement while completing a unit of work.

While conducting research into the evolution of English language assess-

ment, as a TESOL teacher working in the Japanese University system, I had reflected on two particular methods in current use, the selection of a multiple-choice listening test and classroom-based direct oral testing using a criteria.

Nick Underhill stated, in *Testing spoken language* (1987), that ‘Oral assessment is best thought of not as a multiple choice or limited response test’, and although direct testing (for example, the Oral Proficiency Interview), uses a criteria with responses at various performance levels, I believed that Tim McNamara, in *Language Testing* (2000), focused attention on the ability of students to use a range of language during simulated interactions.

‘Oral assessment is a performance test that will engage the candidate in an extended act of communication either receptive or productive.’ (McNamara, 2000). Assessment of students over an extended act of communication could be interpreted, I believe, as a variety of acts of oral communication.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONTINUOUS METHOD OF ASSESSMENT

In order to establish a continuous form of oral assessment I considered previous language testing methods, for example, the early Behaviorist theory (19th Century) of rewarding learned animal behavior, to Robert Lado’s theories of structuralist linguistics, published in *Language Testing*, in 1961. Language, at this time, was believed to be learned by mastery of the features of the language system alone.

The evolution of discrete point testing in the 1960’s, is still evident in today’s education systems. It tested the four macro skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking in isolation from each other. (McNamara 2000: 13).

Working with students being tested with an Oral Proficiency Interview, I made these conclusions about Direct Testing and the OPI.

Australian TESOL language programs operate within a number of institutions in a complex multi-cultural environment. Adaptation of teaching approaches to the demands of the funding provider for teacher/ student-client requirements is commonplace.

Australian teachers must find individual solutions to meet these demands while using a structured curriculum within their teaching program.

The Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is a test of performance in a short

interaction with a native speaker interlocutor. It is judged against a set of descriptions of performance at various levels. (McNamara 2000: 23)

The following example of the OPI procedure, where health workers were tested in clinical situations in hospitals, used these testing stages:

Communicating with patients

Presenting cases to colleagues

Identifying and ranking according to criteria such as complexity, frequency and importance.

‘Test materials were used to simulate these roles and tasks where possible.’ (McNamara 2000: 17).

In Australia, teacher’s reactions to the OPI, are mixed. The job analysis language approach, while attempting to deal with realistic work-place language situations, has led to the arrangement of required responses into particular language levels, as if there were a single correct response or answer to each question.

The teachers also agree that the job analysis language approach, a direct testing approach, like the IELTS performance-based test for academic purposes, used in Australian Universities, has been designed for political, cultural and social purposes.

These tests are used as gateways to education, employment and to move from one country to another. (McNamara 2000: 4)

I concluded that although the oral test involves a subjective judgment by the listener/ tester it allows students to obtain a fair and reliable assessment over an extensive language experience. Making inferences over a range of activities has value.

‘Although the human aspect of the judgment may be less reliable than statistical data (as in Direct Testing criteria), testing is about making inferences.’ (McNamara 2000: 7)

My aim, in designing units of work of integrated activities (LSRW), with oral activities for assessment was, therefore to test oral production over a series of classes and topics, and to provide an extensive language experience during the assessment process. I wished to design an assessment system which would focus on students’ language achievement through-out a one year program of work.

THE CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Preparation of syllabus worksheets for English Major students (Upper-Beginner to Pre Intermediate levels)-

I first prepared a range of multi-level materials from commercial texts and my own written exercises. I used a range of topics familiar to the students' experiences, studies, personalities, and past and future lives, arranging each topic into a combined listening, speaking, reading and writing worksheet.

Preparation for First Year/ Non English Major students (Low Beginner to Upper Beginner+), using a university-prepared textbook (designed by the Language Center) I also followed an integrated approach. Oral assessment included a question and answer sequence with a partner, and, for higher-level students, a dialogue with a partner, using language structures and vocabulary from the textbook.

For English Majors, there were three opportunities for students to give oral responses with their partner and also individually during each unit of work (or worksheet). These responses included 1/ 'cold responses', using teacher's modeled language' 2/ question and answer (with a partner's written and spoken answers), 3/ a Dialogue with a partner and/ or an individual written and spoken student story, using language structures, and vocabulary included in the worksheet, plus students' own language and experiences related to the topic. The time allowance for each unit of work was two classes. Slower students could complete their previous oral activities while beginning the next unit of work.

Implementation of the stages of each worksheet or textbook unit was begun with a question on the topic, (taken from the worksheet or textbook), using modeled responses supplied by the teacher (in the worksheet or textbook). The students' 'cold responses' showed a range of language levels and in the case of an extended answer, (a good response), an approximate level for the final assessment. This provided me with the first oral assessment.

In the second section of the worksheet or textbook, students were instructed to "Ask your partner questions on the topic." English Majors were given key vocabulary and various question forms, and asked to create four or five questions and then to ask their partner the questions and to write their partner's answers in this worksheet section. This provided the second Oral assessment.

A reading component was introduced for the third oral activity as it provided higher level students with additional language, sentence examples, vocabulary and appropriate information which they used together with their own language experience in a written and spoken story (an individual oral response) and a dialogue (with their partner), on the topic.

These two written and spoken activities allowed for a depth of language to be used by the students. Speaking to a partner exhibits language strategies, fluency, confidence, pronunciation, and appropriate language in a conversation. It has a communication outcome. However an individual written and spoken response on a topic allows students time to review language structures, vocabulary, to test sentences out before choosing the best one. It also allows students to reflect on their own experiences and explore new ideas, and to compare ideas, before an oral activity.

In the third and final oral task English Majors students were also required to write and say a Dialogue on the topic, using a selection of language both from their worksheet responses and any additional language or personal information they wished to use on the topic.

Similarly, with the textbook, students developed oral activity 2, ‘Ask your partner’ from the Question and Answer Bank (in the textbook). This provided me with the second oral assessment. For low-level (textbook) students, this completed the assessment. However, higher level students were instructed to “Write and make a conversation with your partner, using questions, vocabulary, conversation fillers, expressions and some extended sentence answers.” This conversation/ dialogue was afterwards presented by each pair of students. Six units of work, with an averaged grade for each, were completed by the students.

In order to give an effective assessment, I took students to the side of the classroom, to listen to oral activities and to ask further questions and to elicit spontaneous answers about the topic. At this time I would also give feedback and the grade. I have found that although students generally show confidence and understanding while working with a ‘writing, and speaking’ approach, (LSRW), their speaking/ performance levels improve when they are looking at and speaking to their partner, with the teacher as listener, and separated from the class group. I believe that performing ‘in front of the class’ for assessment, in fact impedes performance and only reinforces ‘negative evaluation’ by the student being

assessed.

The following samples of a student's written and spoken work illustrate the language features being practiced in the oral activities during assessment of English Majors.

Worksheet theme-Travel/ Topic-Famous cities/ Section One/ Teacher's 'cold question' to the class-What kind of vacation do you like? Modeled teacher language (in the worksheet, with accompanying photographs)-five types of vacations/ and three types of activities for each vacation type were listed. For example, 'a beach vacation'/'go snorkeling, lie in the sun, eat lobster.'

Student's individual response: 'I like a beach vacation because I can swim in it. It's very comfortable and I can feel natural greatness and I can play beach ball with my friends. It's very pleasant.'

Section Two/ Ask your partner-What kind of vacation do you like?/ Where would you like to go on vacation? A list of vocabulary or new words were to be used in the question to the partner. 'Adventure, shopping, nature, beautiful sights, take photographs, delicious food, sports, interesting people, foreign language.'

Students were encouraged to use a variety of question forms, when asking questions. Student's response/ partner's answer: 'Where do you enjoy nature?/ She enjoys nature in the park near her house./ What kind of shopping do you like?/ She likes to buy clothes and accessories./ Where can you eat delicious food?/ She can eat delicious food at Ninniku-ya.'

Section Three/ Reading: about three famous cities: with an individual written and spoken response to: 'What is your favorite place or famous city?' Students used vocabulary from the reading to write and read aloud their individual one page story on the topic.

Student's response: 'My favorite place is Sydney, because there are good restaurants. Australians are very friendly and there is the Opera House and a big bridge. They are wonderful and it has many fashionable stores....

Section four/ A written and spoken dialogue between two partners on travel, vacations, famous cities and personal experiences about the topic, (approximately one written page). In this final oral task, students used a variety of 'worked' language, or made their conversation a personal narrative of travel experiences.

Student's response: 'When I was in Junior High School I stayed in Perth with a home stay family. How long were you... in Perth? One and a half years. The people were funny and kind. I send emails. Great, who were your family? A sister and brother, there were four members.... in my Aussie family (The student shows a photograph of the family). I loved them. I want to go again....'

The assessment outcome for English Majors was the use of both expanded language knowledge and skills in a range of integrated activities. Enhanced topic awareness was gained by reading a short piece on the topic.

The sequence for non-English majors followed the Section One, Two and Three writing/ speaking sequences as above.

The theme was: Student University Life, the topic was 'Traffic Accident.'

Section One: Students were asked the 'cold question's, 'Have you ever been in a traffic accident?' or 'Have you seen a traffic accident?' The responses produced some interesting personal narratives, which were noted for Oral Assessment One.

After listening to a recorded conversation on the topic, to prepare students for the conversation/ dialogue, and modeled language in the Question/ Answer Bank, students read the conversation from the textbook. This assisted them to understand the structure of a written/ read conversation and to isolate questions and answers.

Section Two/ Oral Assessment Two: Students worked with partners, using the Question and Answer Bank, (teacher's model/ Textbook) to produce six questions and answers in a 'conversation style' sequence of Q and A.

In a large class of fifty students, I developed a variation with three and four people in a role play/

'you are a policeman/ or woman/ a witness and a victim/ at the accident.' Students used the Q and A bank to get/ and give information on the accident situation. This game-style variation worked well as a whole class activity. Working in a class group situation, while still interacting with a partner, offsets the anxiety produced by a 'front of class' experience.

A good assessment outcome for low level students was the practicing of basic listening, reading comprehension and speaking in Q and A on the topic and developing confidence while speaking with a partner.

Section Three/ Oral Assessment Three: for higher level students: A Dia-

logue on the topic with a partner:

“Have you ever had an accident? No, I haven’t, but I have ever seen once. What happened? A head-on collision between two motorcycle. How did it happen? One bike had slam into one bike. When did it happen? It happened at about 9o’clock. Who else was in the accident? Nobody. Where did it happen? It happened the middle of the street. Was anyone hurt? Yes, he had fall flat on one’s back. Who was to blame? The man had slam into one bike. How did you feel after the accident? I felt that motorcycle is so dangerous.’

Participating in this form of assessment enabled both English Major and non-English Major students to build fluency and confidence while developing structural ability and appropriateness during language responses with a partner.

It also allowed them to explore a range of topics about University life and other experiences.

This approach encouraged student awareness of their own performance while progressing through each unit of work. This was achieved by teacher-student feedback during the continuous oral performance and assessment process.

THE CRITERIA FOR CONTINUOUS ORAL ASSESSMENT

Level of fluency.

Level of confidence when speaking.

Tone of voice, speed of delivery.

Intonation and pronunciation.

Body behaviour (eye contact, stance (students stand to speak during oral activities), gestures in everyday roleplay situations).

Expression, (use of language in complete sentences).

Use of additional language, for example, new questions, and extended answers.

Sentence structure accuracy, use of vocabulary.

Listening comprehension (listening to the teacher, and partner) during oral interactions and activities.

Comprehension of text and topic.

Volume of voice, clarity of words.

Appropriate use of language in responses during conversations/ dialogues,

(formal and informal English)

When making the criteria, I considered the students' ability to perform in English, within a simulated language situation, and with the social standards that accompany each situation. I believe that as each language is an expression of its own culture, it reflects the uniqueness of that culture through language interactions.

However, English has also become an international language, used in commerce, communication, politics and education. I therefore believe that English as it is studied in each country, allows students to absorb part of the source culture's language values, as well as their own country's social standards within the act of speaking English. Students demonstrate this when they communicate in oral activities in English classes.

Previous methods of assessment either limited the test to a single end of semester oral task, with limited opportunity to evaluate the students over several interactions. A limited number of language items were also used, such as multiple-choice tests of knowledge, language skills were also tested in isolation. Standardized criteria, as used in direct testing, has resulted in the positioning of students within a ranking system while using a prescriptive language formula of responses. However, with a continuous oral assessment, students can develop oral skills over several situational interactions, and use a wide range of language responses to improve their performance. Students can understand what is needed to produce an oral performance and how to improve on a previous assessment. This cycle of continuous learning, performing and assessment allows students to take part in the act of self-assessment during an integration of learning activities which result in an oral performance.

The language outcomes for the students are both short and long term, I believe. Language skills will be expanded and student awareness be developed by this method of integrated skills production and students can develop their language learning over a two or three year course period.

However, the language program must be designed to facilitate such an approach to teaching and learning English. Test makers have not as yet fully considered the methods used in teaching and testing English language students in Japanese universities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Nick Underhill, 'Testing Spoken Language', Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers, 1987.

Tim McNamara, 'Language Testing', Oxford University Press, 2000.

BIOGRAPHY

Lynne Douglas is currently working in the Language Center at Momoyama Gakuin University, Osaka. Her previous experience has included TESOL teaching in the Australian education system in both secondary and adult TESOL programs including Labor Market programs, which uses the OPI assessment methodology.

Since 1999, she has worked in Osaka, Japan, in both secondary and University English language programs. She is particularly interested in the development of curriculum and classroom-based teaching and assessment methodology.

Oral Testing and its Classroom Application in a Japanese University

DOUGLAS, Lynne

This paper discusses the development of a continuous form of oral assessment over a series of English classes of first and second year English major and non-major students. The paper explains how this method of assessment can be administered in the classroom, the preference for this method and implications of implementing this approach into English language program planning in the future.